



WELFARE PEER TA ROUNDTABLE

Developing a Marriage Initiative for Your State

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
September 17-18, 2002

Background

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, from 1970 to 1996 the marriage rate fell by a third, from 77 to 50 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women. Similarly, from 1960 to 2000, the proportion of married adults declined by one fifth, from 70 percent to 58 percent. Research has shown that children growing up in households with married parents have better outcomes in terms of education, physical and mental health, and behavior.

In order to foster progress in stabilizing and strengthening healthy marriages, the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network held a workshop entitled *Developing a Marriage Initiative for Your State* in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on September 17 and 18, 2002. Workshop participants included individuals primarily representing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child support staffs from the following States:

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| ■ Iowa | ■ New Mexico |
| ■ Georgia | ■ Oklahoma |
| ■ Louisiana | ■ South Carolina |
| ■ Michigan | ■ Utah |
| ■ Minnesota | |

The purpose of this 2-day workshop was to create an interactive dialogue with States around appropriate efforts to develop and implement statewide healthy marriage initiatives. Specific topics covered during the workshop included:

- Launching a statewide healthy marriage initiative
- Developing a healthy marriage training curriculum
- Handling resistance and skepticism
- Attracting collaborative partners.

Reflections on State Needs

States that attended the workshop were at different phases in the development of their efforts around healthy marriages. Some States came to the table without having started a healthy marriage initiative. These States were still posing more philosophical questions around creating healthy marriage initiatives such as the appropriate role of State

government. Other States who have started down the path of establishing healthy marriage initiatives had practical questions around implementation such as the appropriate audience, community partners, and funding. And yet other States had established initiatives around healthy marriages and were at the stage where they were considering assessing their programs through performance measures and benchmarks. The following chart reflects these different stages and questions or concerns mentioned by these States:

Initiation Phase	Implementation/Sustainability Phase	Evaluation Phase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Questioning the role government should play in marriage ■ Struggling to balance the notion of healthy marriages without promoting un-healthy relationships (e.g.- domestic violence) ■ Questioning why some perceive marriage is not valued in low-income families (e.g.-an unmarried culture) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Determining a target population for healthy marriage initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Broad vs. narrow – Rural vs. urban – Unwed young mothers/parents – Non-custodial parents – TANF clients ■ Obtaining buy-in from leadership for healthy marriage initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Special commissions – State agencies – Community partners – Interagency involvement ■ Communication among government partners ■ Funding for healthy marriage initiatives (e.g.- Federal and State dollars) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Appropriate performance measures to assess if healthy marriage initiatives are working ■ Benchmarks for success

Voices from the Field

During the workshop participants had the opportunity to share information about their State's healthy marriage initiatives. Although States are at different phases of implementation, many States presented information on promising practices around healthy marriages. Our host State, Oklahoma, presented on their marriage initiative, OMI. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) is a public/private partnership dedicated to reducing the State's divorce rate, strengthening families, and decreasing dependence on government support. OMI's marriage training curriculum, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is a research-based approach to helping couples prevent divorce and preserve relationships.

Joining Oklahoma in highlighting their healthy marriage programs, were the States of Utah, Iowa, Louisiana, and Michigan. Utah was the first State in the nation to create a

commission around marriage. The Governor's Commission on marriage gathers research on marriage-strengthening practices and makes recommendations to the Governor. The Commission also works with families on communication, conflict resolution, and counseling. In Iowa, the General Assembly and the Governor agreed to a provision that establishes the Marriage Initiative Grant Fund. Funds will be used for services to support marriage and to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Louisiana also recently established the Louisiana Commission on Family and Marriage to advise the Governor on how to promote marriage and family using TANF funds. Michigan described their efforts in the "Magic Moment" program, an initiative designed to intervene with young, fragile couples in hospitals at the birth of the child.

During the workshop participant also shared lessons learned and challenges faced around healthy marriage initiatives or programs.

Lessons Learned:

- Community partners are critical to implementing successful healthy marriage programs
- Executive leadership is key to developing healthy marriage initiatives
- Involve the legal advocacy community in your work around healthy marriages
- Using established networks such as Head Start is important for participation in healthy marriage programs
- Don't expect immediate results from your healthy marriage initiatives; it takes time
- Try to provide services when couples are obtaining marriage licenses
- Healthy marriage initiatives can grow from fatherhood initiatives.

Challenges:

- Marriage is absent from culture or is often not discussed
- Funding for programs and initiatives around healthy marriages
- Changes in leadership and priorities
- Defining target populations for healthy marriage programs
- Creating buy-in for healthy marriage initiatives across agencies
- Marriage is viewed more as a human service issue than a workforce issue
- The lack of comfort around using the word "marriage"
- Promoting healthy marriages is complicated when clients have children with multiple partners.

Next Steps

At the end of the workshop, participants were provided with a list of steps to help their States put marriage on the public agenda, as displayed in the following table.

Participants also identified "next steps" that would be carried out when they returned back to their home States. Examples of participant answers included:

- Initiating a State-wide survey on healthy marriages
- Review of State policies on healthy marriages

Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda

1. Start Your Marriage Initiative Today: Do not wait for TANF reauthorization, budget relief, or more time. Commit to making marriage policy and practices a priority.
2. Commit to Learning About and Understanding the Field of Marriage Education and Research: Read research on marriage.
3. Use the Information Presented at this Workshop: Brief groups in your home State on what was discussed at the workshop. Be strategic. Identify a core group of people within the agency who can determine policy and programs and share with them what you learned from the Welfare Peer TA Roundtable.
4. Establish Your Own Marriage Initiative Planning Team, Formally or Informally: Commit to guiding study and debate efforts that will obtain broad support for marriage. Think about who was most receptive during your briefings. Think about who on your agency's team will be ultimately successful.
5. Review Agency's Programs with an Eye toward Marriage: Conduct internal audits to determine what programs can do to be more marriage friendly. Offer comprehensive, multi-level training programs on couples and marriage to administrators and front line staff. Share ideas about Federal policy changes with ACF regional office personnel.
6. Identify Other Government Agencies, Community Partners, and Faith Communities Who Might be Interested in Joining a Broad-Based Marriage Initiative Effort: Find organizations in your community whose missions includes marriage. Find out what resources these organizations have on marriage. What systems or programs does your agency have in place to partner with them now or in the future?
7. Gather Marriage Data for Your State: Compile and publish research on marriage, cohabitation, and divorce. Data and research should inform discussions around marriage. Facts are needed to shape decisions.
8. Work with your Marriage Initiative Team to Develop a Strategy to Educate the Public, Stimulate Debate, Discuss Goals, and Put Forward Constructive Proposals: Use the technical assistance that is available from the Administration for Children and Families. The debate around marriage should include voices from a broad spectrum of people who have a stake in marriage and families.
9. Develop a Big Vision and Manageable Action Plan: Consider community models as pilot programs to test your ideas. Support the development of pilot demonstration projects in new or existing programs that would aim to strengthen couple relationships and marriage in high-risk vulnerable populations.
10. Share Lessons Learned: Consult with other States on lessons learned for implementing marriage strategies and policies.

A more detailed summary of this workshops will be available on the Welfare Peer TA Web site by mid-October. For more information about this event please contact Dr. Jeanette Hercik at 703-385-3200 or e-mail hercikj@calib.com.